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US-China relations: mutual understanding is still possible despite the hostility



Tom Plate

- Getting it right between China and the United States means looking for new sources of insight, not pumping more steroids into old stereotypes
- Despite the rapid downturn in relations, the payoff in seeking mutual understanding and rising above pre-existing notions could be priceless

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US President Donald Trump, who is being treated for Covid-19 at Walter Reed hospital outside Washington, speaks from his hospital room on October 3. Trump's authoritarian, disruptive political style has been likened to Mao Zedong's approach of permanent revolution. Photo: Reuters

The contemporary cacophony of international politics and old stereotypes interferes with the possibility of harmony. Peace overtures are music to the ears of all good people but not to haters, warmongers or [arms merchants](#).

All-out war in a nuclear age will be a hard act to follow. A programme of peace with music, art, multinational conferences, university exchanges – all such efforts can erect bridges over differing

cultures, but not when people refuse to listen. Even so, a level of commitment to deepened cultural dialogue of a new global enlightenment of [soft power](#) will prove more powerful and lasting than the hard, rough stuff of macho men.

Blessed are the honest and hard-working scholars. Music scholar Thomas Irvine makes a telling point in his book *Listening to China: Sound and the Sino-Western Encounter, 1770-1839*. He recalls that during the Cultural Revolution in China, Maoists tried to bludgeon the very idea of Western music as murderous motifs of Western cultural imperialism.

In an eerie sense, though, the West had more or less done the same. Irvine, an Alan Turing Fellow at the University of Southampton, writes that Europeans tended to believe culturally isolated China was simply unable to comprehend European music. To them, its complex harmonic structures were but noise puzzles and only superficially simpler linear music offered solace.

Thankfully, Irvine adds to the story. An 18th-century Jesuit living in China – Jean-Joseph Amiot, the emperor’s translator, – offered a kind of proof of a structural musical commonality between Chinese and Western music, suggesting profound overlap rather than some clash of musical civilisations.

As New York University Professor Larry Wolff pointed out in *The New York Review of Books* last month: “The leading advocate of a universal music was the French composer Jean-Philippe Rameau, who in a musical treatise in 1760 insisted that Chinese music measured the vibrations of musical sound in exactly the same intervals as the European harmonic scale.”

Why overemphasise differences when, with more digging, a balancing measure of commonalities might surface? Getting it right between China and the United States means looking for new sources of insight, not pumping more steroids into old stereotypes.

Sometimes the similarities are striking. Not unlike Mao Zedong, US President Donald Trump foments problems he subsequently tries to take credit for attempting to solve. The Great Leap Forward, for instance, triggered one of history’s greatest recorded famines – millions of Chinese starved to death. In the US, the show of [parading as president](#) while brandishing a maskless face amid the pandemic created a Great Leap Backward.

There is no better example of negative governance than the embarrassing, though wise, decision to [admit Trump to hospital](#). The president has joined the ranks of more than 7 million Americans who have contracted Covid-19, a number that would be lower with more alert health measures and a leader who cared to wear a mask rather than risk infecting others.

That Mao had a system of permanent domestic political agitation to advance revolutionary goals – or at least keep almost everyone off balance – finds a parallel in Trump’s political style. This was evident on the stage of the [US presidential debate](#) last week in Cleveland.

An audience of 73 million viewers witnessed a human cyclotron of contradiction and confusion. Now, even with Trump’s hospitalisation, the dizzying show goes on. No true authoritarian can be seen stopping for rest for any length of time, whether to change direction or just to catch their breath. Authoritarian style always presents a moving target. The primary aim is velocity of movement, not reasonable policy return.

Despite the rapid downturn in Sino-US relations, scholars in the West bravely insist that the past be viewed objectively, not propagandistically. The payoff in mutual understanding could prove priceless as the cold chill wafting over China's universities is not healthy.

Neither is the American fear of hosting [Confucius Institutes on campuses](#). The expulsion of these mainland-financed mini-schools throws good sense to the wind for some imagined "fortress America" at precisely the moment the new threat from Chinese intelligence comes from hacks in the clouds, not spy boots on the ground.

For its part, China under President Xi Jinping must work out a calmer attitude of open-eyed positivity with the next US government. It could try harder to de-emphasise those imagined due bills from the "century of humiliation". It should seek to downplay the notion of some historical ethnic Han DNA of global [cultural superiority](#) – this delusion will prove dysfunctional for China as well as insulting to others.

Besides, psychological crutches only make one more dependent. Yes, there will always be a China – "The country in ruins, rivers and mountains continue", as the poet Du Fu put it centuries ago – but why risk ruination? Let us unmask the past and rise above it. Stereotypes can imprison as effectively as the ones thrown at you by others.

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